

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Flying low

Ever wonder how today's IT professional copes with constant first-class travel to exotic locations and copious quantities of gourmet food? So does **David Robinson**

Some of you may be under the impression that this job is a bed of roses. International travel to sunny climes at the customer's expense, gourmet business lunches, that sort of thing. Would that it were so.

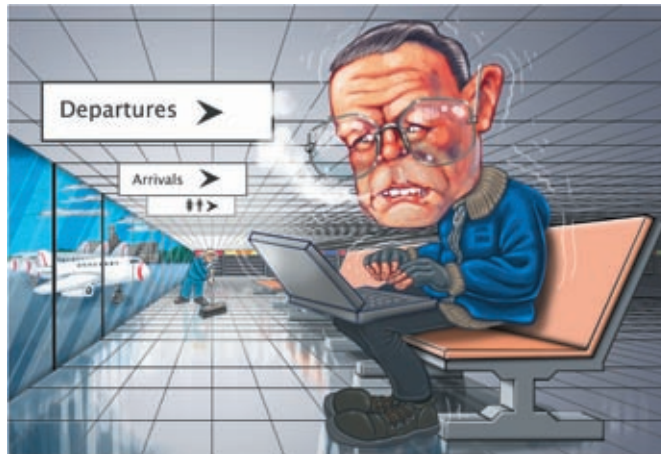
I'm writing this as I sit, freezing, outside gate 12 in the departure lounge at Belfast airport at 7.30pm on a Monday evening. Even more bizarrely, I'm completely on my own. An hour ago a load of folks speaking in lilted brogues got on a plane for Aberdeen and, apart from two harassed souls dashing around madly looking for gate 17, I haven't seen anyone since the man in the World News stand drew down his shutters and went home an hour and a half ago.

PARK LIFE

Scraping the ice of my windscreen at 4am this morning, I'd set off to catch the 7am flight from East Midlands Airport to Belfast International. I'd already booked my parking on the airport website. Apparently the Premier Parking service is next to the passenger terminal, so that should have saved some precious time in the early hours. On the site you fill in all your details, including name and address, car make, model, colour and registration number, departure and return dates and flight numbers.

I arrived to find a queue of people snaking out of the parking office's door. Fifteen shivering minutes later I got to the desk, where the clerk asked for my name and address, car make, model, colour and registration number, etc, which he laboriously typed into his terminal. It seems there's no direct link between the website and the office system, so all the details have to be taken again if you book online (which everyone does, hence the queue). Computer systems – pah!

I then had to check in at the BMI Baby desk. I'd booked the flight online, and the confirmation said that if I had no luggage for the hold – which I didn't – I could check in electronically up to 24 hours before departure. When I tried, the site said, "It is not possible to check in online for this flight," so I had to do



it the old-fashioned way. Another queue. At the boarding gate the announcer said that anyone who had checked in online could embark first. Nobody moved; I wonder why.

OUT FOR THE ACCOUNT

I was on my way to see a company accountant who wanted a demo of one of our specialist software packages. As usual, I'd asked some questions beforehand to make sure the trip would be worthwhile, including the issue of filthy lucre. He picked me up at 8.15am and by 9am we were deep in discussions about features, linking to accounts packages and importing data.

I knew before I set off that he'd already looked at another package. By 10am, things were looking up. The competing package couldn't handle a tricky VAT calculation that applies to some of the company's transactions, whereas our software copes magnificently without even bothering the user with the complications. Our software also seems able to solve any number of his problems. Could this be a result?

At 11am we were joined by one of the company owners, who wanted to discuss the software's asset-management features. This is a relatively minor aspect compared with the stock control, sales, marketing, CRM and profitability control features that most customers buy it for. However, the owner wants these features centred around the asset location. Our software uses the asset ID (serial or stock number) or the customer ID

as the starting point for all those aspects. The competing product, it seems, uses the location. Damn.

I manfully tried to demonstrate the software addressing the owner's issues, but each time the location was a stumbling block. As it's the owner who signs the cheques, guess whose requirements look like taking priority. I offered to add the extra screens and reports needed to do things the owner's way but, looking at the timescales they have in mind, it doesn't look good. By 12 o'clock the demo was falling apart. The accountant was embarrassed because I'd come all that way apparently for nothing, and he arranged for a man from the warehouse to drive me back to the airport to catch the 6.50pm flight back to East Midlands airport.

POWER DOWN

It was going to be a long afternoon. I could have done some work (such as planning the changes that might get us the sale), but my laptop has a battery life of about two hours and I had five hours to fill. The business class lounge has power sockets, but the former KGB employee working in reception won't let me in unless I fork out £15. Does she think I'm made of money?

Fortunately I found a seat next to a children's ride that was out of order and unplugged. I hooked up to the power point and hoped I wouldn't be noticed by some jobsworth who would no doubt tick me off for breaking some regulation or other, but it was free so I settled

down to some design work. With an hour to go I checked my flight details and, damn and blast (that's more or less what I said), it had been cancelled. The next flight wasn't until 9.30pm.

Starving, I went looking for some food. A sign said "Wait Here To Be Seated", so I did. Ten minutes later, I was still standing there. I found the solitary waitress chatting to the barman and asked if she could provide me with a mushroom omelette, which was one of the more appetising offerings on the menu. She poked lethargically at a computer terminal, and responded with "Iss off," in an eastern European accent. Clearly she's not kissed the blarney stone yet. I think she meant that the omelette wasn't available, rather than 'go away'. How can you run out of omelettes? Steak pie? "Iss off." Baked potato and beans? "Iss off."

I "iss off" to Boots next door and buy a pre-packed sarnie, which I devour next to the broken ride. At least I had some power to start this article and keep the production editor happy by delivering on time for once.

ROAD TO NOWHERE

By a strange coincidence, the 9.30pm flight had just enough seats for all the people booked on the 6.50pm and the 9.30pm. Hmm.

I got back to East Midlands airport by 11pm. The Premier Parking man couldn't find my keys. After 20 minutes of noisy searching in a back office, he emerged bearing the keys and smiling triumphantly. Smiling I was not. Still, after 19 hours I was on my way home. Surely nothing else could go wrong?

The logical route home is M1, M18, M62 east, which seems straightforward enough. Until I see the overhead signs: M18 closed for roadworks. "Turn round at the first opportunity," screams the satnav as I pass the junction. "Iss off!" I scream back. **CS**

David Robinson

Software and systems developer

davidr@computershopper.co.uk

